Production, circulation, and use of social research in Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru

María Balarin[(1)], Ignacio González[(2)], Fernando Masi[(2)], Belén Servín[(2)], Natalia Peres[(3)], Miguel Vera[(3)]

(1) Group for the Analysis of Development (GRADE), Peru
(2) Centro de Análisis y Difusión de la Economía Paraguaya (CADEP), Paraguay
(3) ARU Foundation, Bolivia

1 Context

Social research can help promote public policies that are more transparent, democratic, and sustainable. In many developing countries, the importance of connecting research and policy is now a core element for development and the consolidation of democratic systems of governance. However, the common indicators used to assess research environments may not be suitable for developing contexts, where institutions tend to be weaker, patterns of social organization are less differentiated, and research production often operates in different ways. This study was designed to compare the social research environments and research-production dynamics of Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru.

2 Empirical Approach and Main Findings

The case studies considered the following elements : factors structuring research production in each country (norms, policies, institutions, funding characteristics) ; the characteristics of the demand and supply of research (who are the producers and users of knowledge and what kinds of research they produce and demand) ; and the dynamics of research production, circulation, and use to which these factors give rise. In addition, the studies considered the impact of such dynamics on the nature of research agendas (fragmented or consolidated), and on the types (applied, academic) and quality of the research that is produced in these countries. Together with documentary analysis, interviews played a central role in developing the case studies. Policymakers, male and female researchers, heads of research departments in universities and research institutes, and members of the international cooperation community

and civil society organizations were interviewed (23 in Bolivia, 28 in Paraguay, and 19 in Peru).

Social research in Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru — In Latin America, Peru, Bolivia, and Paraguay have low level of research production as measured by the number of publications. However, within these three countries, their output of social sciences research as a percentage of total research output is relatively high. The weakness of research output of many countries in the region can largely be traced to their low level of public investment in science and technology (S&T) as a percentage of GDP, which in LAC countries, averages about 0.8%. Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru spend considerably less than this regional average. The low levels of public investment in S&T helps explain the weakness of research input into science policy. In addition, investment in social science research in particular is much lower, and often non-existent, in the official national budgets for R&D.

Environment for social science research — All three countries are characterized by a historical absence of public funding for research, and a lack of state presence in the development of policies for scientific and technological development. During the structural reform period of the 1990s, the social sciences in all three countries started to provide empirical support for the emerging technocracies. This gave rise to the creation of new research centres and think tanks, and to a shift in some universities to generating research evidence for policymaking. While this has led to a rise in the number of consultancies and evaluations aimed at providing information and data for decision makers, programmatic funding to develop long-term research agendas in the social sciences is still lacking. When comparing Peru and Paraguay during the second decade of the 21st century, there are important differences in the long-term aims and in the inclusion or exclusion of the social sciences from science and technology policies and public funding strategies. Whereas Peru excludes the social sciences from its national portfolio for research funding, Paraguay includes them, albeit at a small scale. In Bolivia, although recent science and technology policies share features similar to those in Peru and Paraguay, the policies do not include funding for the social sciences.

The production of social knowledge — The role played by universities in the production of social research is similar in the three countries. Historically, universities have been teaching-oriented, and by exerting their autonomy resisted efforts to alter the status quo. Lately there have been regulatory efforts in Peru to restructure and improve the quality of higher education and to stimulate research production in universities. Some private non-profit universities have made efforts to promote research to distinguish themselves from other universities and to consolidate their elite status. In Bolivia, there have not been comparable efforts to reorganize the higher education sector, which is characterized by an increased number of private universities (many of low quality) and the absence of public universities in development-policy discussions. Because of the weak role played by universities in the production of social research, independent research centres have been the main institutional sources of social science research in all three countries.

Quality, circulation, and use of social research — In Bolivia, despite the adverse research environment, knowledge production has improved. There are more documents, reports, studies, and evaluations, albeit with diverse quality standards. This can be attributed to the role played by international agencies to promote research production. In Peru, the lack of research policies, together with a marked increase in the demand for non-programmatic and consultancy-type research on the part of the state, has led researchers to focus mostly on producing knowledge "on demand" for decision-making. In Paraguay, private institutions have set the research agenda in the social sciences with some influence over the generation of public policies.

In all three countries, the research agenda is highly fragmented. In general, research agendas emerge from disperse funding opportunities, personal interests, and current economic, political, and social situations, steering researchers toward "academic consultancy" opportunities. Fragmentation results from the diverse needs of funding agencies and the lack of coordination to consolidate more autonomous research agendas, which are crucial to move research from a focus on specific problems to a focus on larger, structural processes and toward conceptual development.

The three countries differ in the processes of institutional development and the mechanisms that exist to promote (good quality) research in universities and research centres. In Peru, processes of institutional development, change, and consolidation have been pushed forward by the institutions themselves. In Bolivia and Paraguay, the sustainability of research centres still depends on the leadership of key figures. This may help explain why associative or second-tier institutions, which play an important role in Peru, have not emerged in these two countries.

Stronger institutional development in Peru has led some institutions to develop internal incentives for improving research quality that have enabled a comparatively greater professionalization of careers in social science research. In Paraguay and Bolivia, in contrast, research career paths are less professionalized, and the portrayal of a research career as a "personal calling" continues to dominate the public imagination.

The training of new researchers occurs outside rather than within research centres and does not constitute a clear career option for young university graduates in the social sciences. Another common element in the three countries is that the supply of social research stems mostly from research centres located in capital cities, and not from universities or institutions in the provinces. Researchers in all three countries describe their experiences as isolated or even solitary.

Beyond policies and regulations, the demand for research has a strong influence on the research environment in each country. In Bolivia, demand for research is almost non-existent, and the little demand that does exist comes mainly from the international donor community seeking consultancy products. In Paraguay, demand is quite diverse, and comes from the both the state and the international donor community, advocacy organizations, grassroots organizations, and, to some extent, businesses that rather atypically have public policy concern. In Paraguay, research centres have also played a key role in generating greater demand for research from the state and other

key institutions. In Peru, the main actors are the state and the international donor community.

3 Main messages for policy and practice

The case studies portray an image of the social sciences in Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru as a "blind spot" in the development of science and technology policies, which, in turn, leads to the lack or scarcity of public funding for social research. In all three countries, this is accompanied by a vision of social research, especially on the part of the state, as being aimed at either the provision of information for decision-making or at ideas for specific political projects. In this context, the possibility of developing critical and relatively independent social science research, capable of identifying and elaborating on social issues, and not just answering top-down agendas dictated by the state or by international donors, is considerably weakened.

In all three countries, there is a lack of programmatic funding and of shared standards of quality that go beyond the specific and immediate relevance of social research. Public funding for independent social research, guided by quality criteria that do not focus exclusively on immediate relevance but rather on the contribution that research can make to theoretical or conceptual knowledge and to identifying and explaining social phenomena, is absent in all three countries.

A symptom of the current situation is the lack of discourse about why social science research is produced. This situation points to the urgent need to generate discussion and debate on the issue. It is important to emphasize the role that the social sciences can play in the identification and formulation of problems, and in the generation of critical ideas.

The study also raises questions about the relationship between research centres (or think tanks) and universities in the production of knowledge. If research centres emerged partly in response to the weak research orientation of universities, what happens now that some countries are trying to reorient universities toward research production while research centres are being pushed toward the production of applied, policy-relevant research ? What will be the gains and losses in this process ? Current institutional dynamics and capacities need to be considered in any reform process to capitalize on existing capacities for research.

The differences found in the three countries suggest the need to consider context when attempting to generate policy debates about these matters. The development of a set of common indicators capable of both measuring and promoting the development of more robust social research environments should take into account the interactions between the supply and demand of research, the identities of researchers as both academics and consultants, and the nature and quality of the knowledge that is produced.